

SNIE 58-5-62

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to Certain Possible US Actions
With Respect to Laos**

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Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

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The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate:

The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, Defense, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

Concurring:

Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State
Director, Defense Intelligence Agency
Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army
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Abstaining:

The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB, and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN POSSIBLE US ACTIONS WITH RESPECT TO LAOS¹

THE PROBLEM

To estimate Communist reactions to certain courses of action by US and allied forces in Laos.

NOTE

The assumptions and courses of action here considered were provided by the Departments of State and Defense for the purpose of this estimate. The paper is organized to respond directly to the considerations raised by the given courses of action.

THE ESTIMATE

I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. We believe that up to the present there have not been fundamental differences among the Communist powers concerned—Moscow, Peiping, and Hanoi—with respect to the Communist campaign in Laos or in southeast Asia as a whole. There may have been disagreements as to tactics and timing, with Hanoi and Peiping tending to be more militant and less patient. The Sino-Soviet dispute concerning Bloc leadership and tactics has not appeared to prevent effective coordination of Communist policy in Laos. We believe that

¹ Other recent estimates bearing on the situation in Laos are: SNIE 10-62, "Communist Objectives, Capabilities, and Intentions in Southeast Asia," dated 21 February 1962; SNIE 58-2-62, "Consequences of Certain US Courses in Laos," dated 11 April 1962; SNIE 58-3-62, "Implications of the Fall of Nam Tha," dated 9 May 1962; and SNIE 58-4-62, "The Current Military Situation and Outlook in Laos," dated 14 May 1962.

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Sino-Soviet differences are not likely materially to affect the Communist responses to the courses of action discussed in this paper. If, however, the situation threatened to reach a point of serious armed conflict, directly involving US and Chinese Communist forces, latent differences might become acute.

2. It is important to note that the Communists do not consider Laos in isolation from their other objectives in southeast Asia. In fact, the Viet Cong in South Vietnam and the Pathet Lao in Laos are both integral parts of North Vietnamese Communist military and party organizations, and both take their guidance from Hanoi. Hanoi, in turn, is supported and counseled by both Moscow and Peiping who, to some extent, are competing for influence over Hanoi. For this reason, Moscow probably feels under certain limitations in counseling patience and restraint on Hanoi, for the Soviets would not want to appear less willing than the Chinese to support the "national liberation struggles" in Laos and South Vietnam. The USSR has played the key diplomatic role for the Bloc and has provided extensive material support, including the airlift operation. We do not believe that the Soviets are likely to abandon their influence in Laos (and to that extent in North Vietnam) to the Chinese.

3. All the Communist powers probably suspect the US of insincerity or at least of procrastination in its proclaimed effort to bring General Phoumi to serious negotiations. The Communist side has probably lost some of its earlier interest in a coalition government, particularly as the Communist military situation in Laos has steadily improved at the expense of both the "neutralist" forces and the Laotian Government forces. They probably share our judgment that the Forces Armees Royales (FAR) cannot by themselves effectively defend any point remaining in government hands, and that the Pathet Lao, assisted by the North Vietnamese troops now in Laos, could quickly seize all the major towns still held by the FAR forces.

4. The Communists probably interpret the current US troop movement to Thailand as an attempt to deter them

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from further military action in Laos. They recognize that the move puts the US in an improved position to intervene if fighting is resumed, but they probably believe that the US has not yet taken a firm decision on the particular circumstances which would require it to intervene. They probably have revised upward, however, their estimate of the chances that some major violation of the cease-fire in the future would produce such an intervention.

5. In these circumstances, we believe that the Communists will not alter substantially their current tactic of suspending major military action while waiting for the Royal Laotian Government (RLG) to accept their terms for a political settlement. They are unlikely at this point to move any Chinese combat forces or additional North Vietnamese troops into Laos. If the RLG does not make some substantial movement toward Communist terms, the Communists will probably renew their military pressures. However, the Communist side will probably seek to keep the level and incidence of its military operations below what it believes would prompt US intervention, particularly since it probably calculates that US intervention might, at some juncture, involve air operations against the highly important Communist bases of supply and LOC "safe-havens" of northern Laos and North Vietnam.

II. ASSUMPTION ONE

Neither side has openly repudiated the cease-fire or the principle of a negotiated settlement, but continuing Communist military activity constricts the territory under RLG control. US policy remains to seek a negotiated settlement based upon a neutralist coalition government.

COURSE A: The US provides the RLG and the FAR with assistance of the type and up to the level of that provided to South Vietnam.

6. If the US initiated this course of action, it is possible that the Communist side would see this as no more than a US attempt to strengthen the RLG negotiating position. We

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believe it more likely, however, that they would suspect that the US had decided, whatever it might say publicly, to abandon the effort for a coalition government. They would probably believe that the US intended to establish effective non-Communist control over a substantial part of Laotian territory. They might even believe that this was a first step in a US plan to buttress the FAR, if necessary, with US combat forces. The Communist side would almost certainly increase its military investment in Laos, perhaps acknowledging openly the presence of North Vietnamese troops and increasing their number, providing them and the Pathet Lao with increased logistics support, more artillery, and, perhaps, a greatly expanded airlift. The Communists probably would not hesitate to respond to FAR encroachments on areas under their control in Laos with counter-action up to the scale of the Nam Tha operation. They would also probably increase sharply their infiltration and subversion efforts in areas under RLG control but would almost certainly not attempt to seize the major towns along the Mekong remaining in RLG hands.

COURSE B: In addition to the actions assumed in Course A, the US carries out a substantial buildup of its combat forces in Thailand to about 20,000 troops.

7. Although this additional course of action would not present any greater immediate threat to Communist interests in Laos, the Communists would probably take a more serious view of the situation because of the proximity of US forces capable of intervening in Laos. The North Vietnamese would probably reinforce their troops in Laos and the Chinese might move forces to their border with northern Laos. At the same time, the Communists would probably move for a resumption of negotiations.

COURSE C: Troops from the US and Thailand, and from those SEATO members willing to participate, are stationed in RLG-held areas to preserve the cease-fire and to prevent further Pathet Lao/North Viet-

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namese military advances. The US and allied troops would initiate no offensive action against Communist-held positions. The limited US military intentions would be conveyed to the Communist side both privately and publicly.²

8. Under the assumption given, the cease-fire would still have been generally in force when the US took the given action, although limited Communist military encroachment continued. In these circumstances, the Communist side would probably suspect that the US intent went farther than the stated purpose—preservation of the cease-fire. Their judgment of the real US intention would rest to some extent on the size and disposition of the allied forces moving into Laos and the size and composition of the forces backing them up in Thailand. In any case, they would probably believe that the US, though still prepared to accept a satisfactory political settlement, was willing and ready to participate directly in the event of subsequent Communist military activity in Laos.

9. North Vietnam would almost certainly introduce additional forces into Laos. The Chinese Communists might take this opportunity to move "volunteers" into the northern provinces, and the North Vietnamese and Soviets, although they might not welcome this development, would probably accede. Soviet logistical support would be stepped up. The Pathet Lao, with North Vietnamese participation, would probably increase the scale of their military actions throughout Laos with the intent of confining US-allied control of the specific areas occupied. They would probably harass US lines of communications, outposts, and patrols. Communist agents would probably undertake terrorist and sabotage activities within the US-occupied towns.

10. We do not believe, however, that the Communist forces would attempt to drive the US troops from the areas they

² A lesser variant of this course would involve stationing allied forces only in the Mekong valley towns to free FAR troops from garrison duty for active operations against the insurgents (SEATO Plan 5).

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occupied. The Communists probably would consider that over the long run, confinement of US and allied forces to these areas would place the US in an awkward military-political position, and might cause the US to withdraw. Meanwhile, they would probably revert to pressures for a negotiated settlement with the withdrawal of US troops as the initial objective of any agreement.

III. ASSUMPTION TWO

The Communist side attacks important RLG outposts—such as Saravane or Attapeu. US policy remains to seek ultimately a negotiated settlement, but immediate steps are required to prevent further cease-fire violations and to forestall the loss of additional RLG-held territory.

COURSE D: Troops from the US and Thailand and from those SEATO members willing to participate, are moved into RLG-held areas to indicate that further violations of the cease-fire will be resisted. US and allied troops would initiate no offensive action against Communist-held positions. The limited US military intentions would be conveyed to the Communist side both privately and publicly.

11. The assumed Communist military operations would probably mean that the Communists had decided to force the RLG into negotiations under more unfavorable conditions or to eliminate, bit by bit, effective RLG control. They would have estimated that, by refraining from an all-out attempt at military takeover, US intervention could, in fact, be avoided.

12. Despite the US assertion of limited military objectives, the Communists almost certainly would suspect that US intentions were broader, and they would take such steps as they deemed necessary to protect themselves and their positions in Laos against further US deployments and a US attack. They would almost certainly intensify their logistical

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buildup, further strengthen North Vietnamese forces, and possibly introduce Chinese Communist "volunteers" into the northern provinces of Laos. However, as in the case of Course C, we believe that the Communist forces would probably press for a negotiated settlement with the withdrawal of US troops as the initial objective of any agreement.

IV. ASSUMPTION THREE

The Communist side resumes military activity with offensives against the major towns along the Mekong remaining in RLG hands. US policy shifts from seeking a neutralist coalition government to seeking a *de facto* partition of Laos.

COURSE E: Troops from the US and Thailand, and from those SEATO members willing to participate, enter Laos to establish a *de facto* partition of the country which would leave in RLG hands only that part of Laos south of approximately the 17th parallel. The allied forces would take offensive action to clear and secure southern Laos to the border with South Vietnam.

13. The assumed Communist military operations against the major towns remaining in Laotian Government hands would mean that the Communists had abandoned the idea of a neutral Laos under a coalition government and had determined to end the Laotian conflict by military means. Their intent would be to bring Laos under direct Communist control by achieving a quick and complete victory over the RLG.

14. The Communist decision to conduct such a general offensive would mark a major new step in Communist policy regarding Laos. We believe that such a decision, marking a substantial shift in Bloc policy, would have been based on a belief that the US would not respond by intervening and would have been preceded by considerable debate among the Communist partners. When the US intervened, the Communists

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would be concerned to prevent the conflict from spreading beyond Laos. Nevertheless, they would take such steps as they deemed necessary to protect themselves and their positions in Laos against further US deployments and a US counterattack. They would resist strenuously a US effort to clear the area to the South Vietnamese border. They would almost certainly initiate a rapid logistical buildup, further strengthen North Vietnamese forces, and possibly introduce Chinese Communist "volunteers." They would probably assume that the US would not be willing to wage a prolonged and unpopular war, and that the US would in due course be prepared to negotiate a settlement.

COURSE F: In addition to the areas occupied under Course E, allied forces occupy Sayaboury Province and, with the exception of the city of Luang Prabang, the major towns along the Mekong.

15. Movement into these additional areas would increase the apprehension of the Communists about US intentions. They would offer vigorous resistance at points they had already occupied, almost certainly with North Vietnamese reinforcements. Further, the Chinese Communists would be more likely in this circumstance than under Course E above to commit their own forces, probably under the fiction that they are "volunteers."

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